

Belarus: A Chinese Solution?¹

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Bezviz, or the European Union's visa waver program extended to Ukraine a year ago in June 2017,² must have angered the autocratic regimes in neighboring Belarus and Russia. Why would Ukrainians, who had just lost Crimea and were unable to stop the Russian incursion in the east of their country, be allowed to enjoy Rome or Paris without having to face the indignity of applying for a Schengen visa? The Eiffel Tower, the Sistine Chapel, or the Canaries can hardly be successfully replaced with the likes of Sochi, the rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, or the Crimean seacoast stricken by the dearth of water. Neither are the Kuril Islands, known for their balmy climate conducive to all-year-round holidaying. To the average Belarusian and Russian the west inexplicably rewarded Ukraine for the military losses suffered with the privilege that should first be accorded to Russians or Belarusians.

Autocracies as good at winning elections with the help of political technologists and sophisticated IT systems as those in Belarus and Russia are nevertheless still susceptible to fickle popularity felt by the 'electorates' for the strongman at the top. The less a dictator is popular, the more direct violence has to be applied to wage power. In turn, unleashing too much violence causes popularity to plummet even further. This confronts the regime with the unwanted downward spiral of increasing state violence that simultaneously generates instability, which in no time may morph into effective political opposition. And such opposition stands a chance of unsettling the dictator from power; an option best to be avoided. For any solid autocracy to last it must be predictably popular and economically viable. Then the amount of known unknowns is radically limited to that of succession only.

In early June 2018 I arrived to Minsk (or Miensk, the traditional form of the city's name in Belarusian, expunged in the interest of the continued russification of Belarus³) on the EU-financed new fast train service from the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius.⁴ The Belarusian border and customs officers did their best not to appear threatening or Soviet-like in their behavior.⁵ The Belarusian government needs to scrape together as much hard currency as possible to support the numerous unprofitable state and para-state enterprises. Retaining an unreformed centrally-planned economy⁶ with compulsory full

¹ I thank Catherine Gibson, Liuboŭ Kozik and Hienadz Sahanovič for their useful comments and advice. Obviously, it is me alone who is responsible for any remaining infelicities.

² <http://nv.ua/ukraine/events/bezviz-i-shengenskij-kodeks-kak-eto-budet-dejstvovat-dlja-ukraintsev-1036026.html>.

³ <http://be-tarask.wikipedia.org/wiki/Менск#Варыянты>.

⁴ <http://m.railjournal.com/index.php/europe/minsk-vilnius-electrification-completed.html>; <http://belarusdigest.com/story/how-eu-money-stimulates-lithuania-belarus-border-cooperation/>.

⁵ Cf <http://belarusfeed.com/minsk-vilnius-train/>.

⁶ <http://www.pri.org/stories/2010-01-07/can-belarus-communism-lite-go>.

employment,⁷ as inherited from the Soviet Union, comes at a price.⁸ For 24 long years Russia has patiently footed the bill, ensuring sufficient popularity for keeping Alexander Lukashenka (Aliaksandar Lukašenka in the Belarusian Łacinka, or Latin alphabet), the country's first-ever President, in power. Lukashenka reciprocated by reinstating or keeping Soviet-time symbols and institutions popular with the population,⁹ and by making 'his' Belarus Russia's most trusted ally and fraternal nation.¹⁰ In 1997 the Belarusian leader shook hands with the Russian President Boris Yeltsin over the treaty that saw the establishment of a Union State of Russia and Belarus.¹¹ The quite hope was that the young dictator, then aged 43, would have a prospect of becoming a Russian or even Union President in not too distant a future.¹²

A fat chance under President Vladimir Putin's watch, who is as sporty as Lukashenka and a mere two years older.¹³ Within the Union State's framework, much to Lukashenko's discontent, the Russian President envisions the integration of Belarus into Russia as a province of the latter country.¹⁴ Minsk stepped on the brake stalling any meaningful integration.¹⁵ The Kremlin periodically replied with market prices for the typically subsidized oil and gas exported to Belarus.¹⁶ Lukashenka reciprocated with overtures to the European Union, ensuring badly needed investment and loans from gullible Europeans¹⁷ who hoped that the process of democratization in Belarus must have now begun in earnest.¹⁸ Minsk's balancing game as a self-proclaimed 'bridge' between west and east¹⁹ paid off handsomely, for a time. After the founding of a Eurasian Union in 2015, Putin became impatient with his 'closest ally.'²⁰ Strategically and economically, Kazakhstan is of more importance to the Kremlin than Belarus, though the latter country happens to be located in the historical center of the 'Russian world,'²¹ a geopolitical concept recently so dear to Putin's heart.²² What is more, quite luckily for the Belarusian President, since 2014 Minsk has regularly hosted peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine under the OSCE's auspices for the sake of containing the ongoing Russo-

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39221147>.

⁸ Cf <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-02-27/crisis-over-economic-situation-belarus-after-two-years>; <http://belarusdigest.com/story/state-debt-and-weak-trade-policy-test-belarus-recovery-digest-of-the-belarusian-economy/>.

⁹ <http://belarusdigest.com/story/national-symbols-in-belarus-the-past-and-present?pdf=243>.

¹⁰ http://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2farchive%2fpolitics%2f1995%2f07%2f02%2fidentity-crisis-pulls-many-in-belarus-toward-russia%2f2538e212-780c-4c93-ae9e-809043aec650%2f%3f&utm_term=.81c3f46ca568.

¹¹ <http://lfrpr.lt/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/LFPR-15-16-Zulys.pdf>; http://articles.latimes.com/1997-04-03/news/mn-44920_1_belarus-sign-union-treaty.

¹² <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/a-33-2005-04-21-voa3/658690.html>.

¹³ <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/1,114873,1506126.html>; <http://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/diabelski-mlyn-z-muchami-i-kotletami-130693>.

¹⁴ <http://news.tut.by/politics/402970.html>.

¹⁵ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/russia-leans-on-belarus-europe-s-last-dictator-under-pressure-from-moscow-a-712481.html>.

¹⁶ <http://belarusdigest.com/story/does-belarus-stand-a-chance-in-a-new-oil-war-with-russia/>.

¹⁷ <http://belarusdigest.com/story/how-not-to-be-cheated-by-belarus-authorities/>.

¹⁸ <http://www.dw.com/en/european-union-agrees-to-end-nearly-all-sanctions-on-belarus/a-19050183>; <http://www.rferl.org/a/lukashenka-hails-friendly-belarus-eu-ties/29310651.html>.

¹⁹ <http://www.economy-web.org/?p=311>; <http://mfront.net/dakumanty/malady-front-peramenau>.

²⁰ <http://jamestown.org/program/belarus-risk-impatient-russia/>.

²¹ Cf <http://news.tut.by/politics/454810.html>.

²² <http://russkiymir.ru/>; <http://ross-bel.ru/vladimir-putin-my-zaschitim-russki>.

Ukrainian War²³ (though Belarus is careful enough to send humanitarian aid earmarked for Ukraine to the breakaway 'republics' under Russian control²⁴). And in 2017 Lukashenka unfurled *bezviz* for westerners who now may visit Belarus for a week without a visa²⁵ (Unexpectedly, in late July 2018, this visa-free period was extended to 30 days.²⁶) A typical EU tourist spends substantially more in the country than a Russian counterpart.²⁷

All that just in time. In the spring of 2018 the Kremlin struck with another 'dairy war.' The import of Belarusian milk and milk products, so valued by Russian customers, was stopped in its tracks on spurious health grounds.²⁸ The Belarusian economy found itself again in a dire position.²⁹ But Lukashenka has perfected brinkmanship for longer than Putin, who assumed office in 2000, or six years later than Lukashenka. Prior to the Football World Cup in Russia, Minsk reintroduced border checks on the supposedly internal Belarusian-Russian border of the Union State. On the face of it, this was done to help Russian colleagues with security, because foreigners on Russian visas are not permitted to enter Belarus.³⁰ However, the rumor is that the border checks may stay for good, ensuring that Belarus would drift farther apart from Russia,³¹ thus unmaking any integration achieved so far within the Union State. And to up the ante, when on 21 June 2018 Lukashenka magnanimously met the EU Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, he expressed a heart-felt wish that '[Belarus] would like to have that level of relations with the EU that could be envied even by the EU members.'³²

When I disembarked from the train in Minsk, the steel-and-glass shiny new railway station exuded a worldly air. What struck me was the prominent Chinese signage alongside, information notices in Belarusian and English.³³ No independent press or mass media are left in Belarus. Tellingly, in the week of my arrival, the country's sole independent newspaper, or the Belarusian-language weekly *Naša niva*, discontinued the publication of its paper edition.³⁴ There are no weekly news magazines worth this name

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minsk_Protocol; <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/07/18/who-is-who-in-the-minsk-peace-process-infographics/>; <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=62939>.

²⁴ <http://www.belta.by/society/view/beloruskij-gumanitarnyj-konvoj-vernulsja-iz-ukrainy-307126-2018/>;
<http://www.belta.by/infographica/view/gumanitarnaja-pomosch-ukraine-12596/>.

²⁵ <http://belarusfeed.com/welcome-to-belarus-11-facts-on-visa-free-entry/>.

²⁶ <http://m.belta.by/president/view/srok-bezvizovogo-prebyvanija-v-belarusi-prodlen-do-30-dnej-311638-2018/>;
<http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=213224>; <http://www.pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P31800295&p1=1&p5=0>.

²⁷ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/.../europes-last-dictatorship-has-a-new-plan-tourism/>; <http://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/01/17/why-europes-last-dictatorship-is-offering-visa-free-entry>.

²⁸ <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/dairy-dispute-sours-belarus-russia-relations>.

²⁹ <http://belarusdigest.com/story/shrinking-economic-freedom-and-milk-war-with-russia-belarusian-economic-digest/>;
<http://belsat.eu/en/news/belarus-foreign-debt-soars-to-crisis-point-economist/>.

³⁰ <http://csfps.by/en/posts/20171107>; <https://www.dw.com/ru/как-на-границе-рф-и-беларуси-контролируют-болельщиков-чм-2018/a-44272790>.

³¹ <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/58592.html>; <http://russian.rt.com/inotv/2018-06-03/Belsat-v-Minske-zagovorili-o>;
<http://www.ritmeurasia.org/news--2018-07-09--beloruskaja-granica-bez-demarkacii-ne-obojtis-37405>.

³² http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/meeting-with-european-commissioner-for-european-neighborhood-policy-and-enlargement-negotiations-johannes-18976/.

³³ Cf http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinese_signage_Main_Railway_Station_Minsk_Belarus.jpg.

³⁴ <http://nn.by/?c=lr&i=210734>.

on sale in Belarus.³⁵ Although some Russian central dailies are imported, none of Russia's news weeklies is. The vast majority of the press are variously titled propaganda broadsheets of a mere 10 to 16 pages, much of the contents taken up by the voluminous television schedule for numerous channels. All these channels are either of the state-controlled Belarusian or Russian television.

In my hotel room, for several days, state television regaled me with news bulletins from the 18th summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, held in the Chinese city port of Qingdao; what a gulf of difference from the typical news coverage in Britain focused on Brexit, Donald Trump and the Syrian War. In contrast most Belarusian reports zoomed on Lukashenka and Chairman Xi shaking hands and talking amicably. The Belarusian mass media kept reasserting that 'with strong China, Belarus will be strong, too,' while the Belarusian President kept referring to his years-long friendship with Chairman Xi.³⁶ The presence of other leaders at this summit, including Putin, was sidelined in the reports, making this event to appear as if it were a Belarus-China summit. Against the background of a prospect of establishing a free trade area between China and the Eurasian Union, Lukashenko stole all the limelight by announcing the introduction of the visa-free travel to Belarus for Chinese citizens (for stays up to 30 days).³⁷ Immediately after the successful visit, the Belarusian President did not fail to congratulate Xi on his birthday³⁸. Chinese journalists replied in kind, praising Lukashenka's 14-year-old son Kolya (Nicholas, or Mikalaj in Belarusian) as a beautiful and well-educated boy, who speaks Chinese so well³⁹.

Minsk stakes its hopes on cashing in on China's One Belt, One Road initiative that Russia would not dare to derail. If successful, Belarus could become one of China's most important land entrepôts to the European Union.⁴⁰ In preparation, a Department of Chinese Language and Culture was opened at the prestigious Minsk State Linguistic University in 2017,⁴¹ and Chinese poetry began to be published in Belarusian translations.⁴² The official website of Belarus is offered in Chinese, alongside its Belarusian, Russian and English versions.⁴³ Chinese-language information displays appeared in airports⁴⁴ and across the railway stations of the regional capitals.⁴⁵ The

³⁵ Cf <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/58600.html>.

³⁶ <http://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-s-silnym-kitaem-budet-silnoj-i-belarus-306268-2018/>.

³⁷ <http://news.tut.by/society/596234.html>; http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/28/c_137285723.htm;
<http://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-china-visa-free-travel-agreement-enters-into-force-on-10-august-113127-2018/>.

³⁸ <http://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-pozdravil-si-tszinpina-s-dnem-rozhdenija-252730-2017/>.

³⁹ <http://tv.mk.ru/video/2018/02/15/kolya-lukashenko-zagovoril-pokitayski-i-sygral-na-royale.html> ;
<http://sputnik.by/lifestyle/20180610/1035929883/nikolaj-lukashenko-vtoroj-po-populyarnosti-belarus-china.html>.

⁴⁰ <http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-and-one-belt-one-road-alternative-oil-scto-belarus-state-press-digest/>.

⁴¹ http://www.tvr.by/news/obshchestvo/v_mglu_poyavitsya_fakultet_kitayskogo_yazyka/.

⁴² <http://blr.belta.by/culture/view/prezentatsiya-zbornika-kitajskaj-paezii-hh-stagoddzia-u-perakladze-na-belaruskuju-movu-adbudzetsta-u-65967-2018/> ; <http://mininform.gov.by/pda/ru/news-ru/view/vyjshau-u-svet-jubilejny-dzjasjaty-pa-liku-zbornik-perakladau-kitajskaj-paezii-u-seryi-svetlyja-znaki-paety-1067/>; <http://philology.bsu.by/by/navuka/2016-06-01-10-48-03/1361-gurtok-peraklada-tvora-kitajskaj-litaratury-na-belaruskuyu-movu-dyyalog>.

⁴³ <http://www.belarus.by/cn>.

⁴⁴ <http://belarusfeed.com/airport-chinese-introduced/>.

⁴⁵ <http://euroradio.fm/en/chinese-language-information-signs-railway-station-mahilou>.

authorities in Horadnia (Grodno) went a step further commissioning new manhole covers for downtown with the name of their city in Chinese, or 格罗德诺.⁴⁶

In this thickening Sinic context, the Belarusian writer Viktar Marcinič's⁴⁷ political fiction novel *Mova* 墨瓦, published in 2014, acquires a prophetic dimension. The plot is set in the year of 2044, or 4741, according to the Chinese calendar. Europe is separated by a huge wall from the Union State of China and Russia. Minsk, which serves as the novel's setting, is dominated by the local Chinatown.⁴⁸ A year after the novel's publication, in 2015, many Belarusians were rudely awakened to the growing Chinese presence in their country. About a thousand Chinese workers were working on a construction project in the sleepy town of Dobruš (population 18,000) in Homel Region. In an unprecedented protest over unpaid wages 200 of them marched 300 kilometers to Minsk, for all to be seen, in order to petition the Chinese ambassador. This shocked, given that the Belarusian security forces (or the unreformed KGB) are so good at preventing any protests by Belarusians. Predictably, the Chinese laborers' protest was crushed, too, but not before they reached the Belarusian capital after a week-long trek and met the ambassador.⁴⁹ A year earlier, in the prophetic year of 2014, near Minsk the construction of the huge China-Belarus Industrial Park Great Stone (*Velikii Kamen'*, 中白工业园 - “巨石”) commenced.⁵⁰ (It appears though that thus far this initiative has not really taken off;⁵¹ by mid-2018 the 31 companies present in this park invested less than \$0.5m in the project.⁵²)

President Lukashenka's sights are squarely on China.⁵³ Putin slighted him, choosing to go on his first state visit after reelection as Russian President to Austria, rather than to Belarus, which was the established tradition in the Union State of Russia and Belarus⁵⁴. While the 'dairy war' with Russia rages on,⁵⁵ in the wake of the Qingdao summit, Belarus began exporting milk products to China instead.⁵⁶ Also, meat from Belarus is to be offered to Chinese consumers soon⁵⁷. On 3 July 2018, the anniversary of the Red Army's 1944 victory over the German occupying forces in Minsk was again celebrated as the Belarusian Day of Independence⁵⁸. Lukashenka lauded this year's parade as the best

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grodno#/media/File:New_manhole_cover_with_the_name_of_the_Belarusian_city_of_Grodno_in_Chinese,_%E6%A0%BC%E7%BD%97%E5%BE%B7%E8%AF%BA,_City_Center,_Saviecka_St,_20_June_2018.jpg

⁴⁷ http://be-tarask.wikipedia.org/wiki/Віктар_Марціновіч.

⁴⁸ [http://be-tarask.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мова_\(раман\)](http://be-tarask.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мова_(раман)).

⁴⁹ <http://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-workers-belarus/27141591.html>; <http://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-chinese-workers-clash-police/27141626.html>.

⁵⁰ http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Великий_Камень; <http://www.belarus.by/cn/business/business-environment/industrial-park-great-stone>; http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Великий_Камень.

⁵¹ <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2016/9/12/222060/>.

⁵² <http://m.blr.belta.by/economics/view/rezidenty-vjalikaga-kamenja-majuts-namer-investsiravats-u-praekty-paumilijarda-dolarau-67996-2018/>.

⁵³ Cf <http://udf.by/english/main-story/122527-chinese-loans-will-not-solve-external-debt-problems-of-belarus.html>.

⁵⁴ <http://www.svaboda.org/a/29306360.html>; <http://www.svaboda.org/a/29273726.html>; http://udf.by/news/main_news/174703-lukashenko-utratil-pravo-brachnoy-nochi.html; <https://belaruspartisan.by/m/politic/427460/>.

⁵⁵ <http://produkt.by/news/belarus-teryet-molochnyy-rynok-rossii>.

⁵⁶ www.belta.by/newscompany/view/baranovichskij-molochnyj-kombinat-otgruzil-pervuju-partiju-produktsii-v-kitaj-310253-2018/.

⁵⁷ <http://produkt.by/news/belarus-v-2018-godu-uvelichit-v-3-raza-eksport-molochnoy-produkcii-v-kitay>.

⁵⁸ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Day_\(Belarus\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Day_(Belarus)).

ever,⁵⁹ perhaps thanks to the fact that Chinese soldiers and officials participated in it for the first time.⁶⁰ Lukashenka knows best what he is doing, no need to consult with MPs about this sudden turn to the Far East, let alone the population at large. An official praised the President as 'above god'⁶¹ (in his own words Lukashenka's praises himself as 'a lesser evil' than presumably Putin⁶²). And in order to prod the unconvinced in the right direction, Lukashenka threatened them that the only other option is the absorption of Belarus by 'another country' (read: Russia), and a war, like that in eastern Ukraine (waged on this country by Russia).⁶³ In order to gather moderate opposition forces around his position, and to show the Kremlin the middle finger, Lukashenka also allowed for a slightly wider official use of Belarusian language,⁶⁴ which some – with rather too much hype⁶⁵ – consider a form of 'soft Belarusianization.'⁶⁶ The employment of Belarusian remains at best ornamental under Lukashenka's watch. That is why the recent publication of the works by Belarus's sole Nobel Prize laureate in literature, Svetlana Alexievich (Śvialana Aliaksijevič) was possible only thanks to crowdfunding.⁶⁷ Most of the run was offered free of charge to libraries across Belarus, but tellingly the libraries in Grodno Region refused to accept this gift.⁶⁸

Putin looks on and exerts more pressure on Lukashenka. He knows that in a quarter's time winter will hit Belarus. The Kremlin threatens that Belarus will go bankrupt, unless it fulfills all the agreements signed with Russia and within the framework of the Union State.⁶⁹ Just another bluff in the history of the 'ever-closer ties between the two states closest to each other on the planet earth'?⁷⁰ Who knows? One thing is sure, in the balancing act of extracting subsidies from the interested partners, Lukashenko seeks to add China to Russia and the European Union. The previously binary choice between Moscow and Brussels, will become fuzzier with this novel 'triangulation,' making it more difficult for one of the prospective three partners to put Belarus in spot. Will Beijing's growing influence replace Russian with Chinese as Belarus's leading language of communication? It seems unlikely, at least in the short or medium term. However, Chinese may unsettle English as the country's preferred foreign language. There is no hope for the President's genuine support for the Belarusian language, apart from support for a handful of tokenistic translations of Chinese classics into Belarusian. The question that remains is whether China may want to play such a role in this game as devised by Lukashenka. It may, because the quid pro quo would come quite cheap from Beijing's perspective, while it would enable Chairman Xi to put another geopolitical constraint on

⁵⁹ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=212196>.

⁶⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1OJLvSlrY>; <http://www.ecns.cn/hd/2018-07-04/detail-ifyvvuhv1808278.shtml>.

⁶¹ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=212580>.

⁶² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/belarus/11925324/Alexander-Lukashenko-The-leader-who-wants-to-turn-Belarus-into-a-North-Korean-style-dynasty.html>.

⁶³ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=211639>; <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/76714>.

⁶⁴ <http://www.dw.com/ru/как-лукашенко-хочет-укрепить-суверенитет-с-помощью-белорусского-языка/a-37561775>.

⁶⁵ Cf <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=210680>.

⁶⁶ <http://newizv.ru/article/general/02-07-2018/igra-bez-riska-vzpravdu-li-boitsya-moskvy-lider-belorussii>.

⁶⁷ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=211080>.

⁶⁸ <http://belsat.eu/news/bibliyateki-garadzshchyny-admovilisya-ad-aleksievich-pa-belarusku/>.

⁶⁹ <http://belarus-mt.ru/blog/43056189610/Belarus-dolzha-vyipolnit-vse-usloviya-Rossii,-inache-ee-zhdet-d>; <http://belaruspartisan.by/economic/431040/>.

⁷⁰ <http://newsone.ua/news/politics/lukashenko-na-planete-net-stran-blizhe-chem-belarus-kazaxstan-i-rossiya.html>; <http://www.soyuz.by/news/opinion/6082.html>.

resurgent Russia. An added benefit would be Minsk's overzealous participation in the One Belt and One Road Initiative, plus well designed photo-ops en route, when Xi embarks on the next global tour to Europe.

As a result, Lukashenko may be granted the another decade or so in power that he needs so badly to get his youngest teenager son Kolya ready for smooth succession.⁷¹ Kolya began his political career in 2008, as a four-year-old toddler, when he met Venezuela's maverick communist leader Hugo Chavez and Pope Benedict XVI. Afterward Kolya has been regularly seen with other state leaders, with whomever his father gets invited, including the Obamas.⁷² Kolya is the only potential Belarusian leader, whom President Lukashenka gladly allows ample space on Belarusian television and in the press.⁷³ The presidential son is already fluent in Mandarin and may improve further on his father's missing skills, if the reports turn to be right that Kolya's Belarusian is quite reasonable and improving fast.⁷⁴ In the past, the fact that Kolya's mother is not Lukashenka's wife, but the President's paramour and former personal medical doctor,⁷⁵ would be an insurmountable obstacle to his predicted rise to power. Now this fact could even attract socially progressive voters. A patchwork family dynasty is on the making. Rather than democratization, Lukashenka's Belarus seems to be following the post-Soviet model of hereditary dynasties (as in Azerbaijan or Chechnya) or succession in the narrow circle of family-cum-friends (as in Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan).⁷⁶

In 2012 Lukashenka moved the Slavic Bazaar Festival to Alexandria (Aleksandryja)⁷⁷ – his mother's home village and the place where he grew up.⁷⁸ This festival of culture was one of many when it was first established in 1992. But in the 2010s it became a prime instrument with which the President reasserts Belarus's own cultural identity, countering Putin's vision of the Russian world.⁷⁹ In this line of thinking Belarus is the center of both Europe⁸⁰ and the Slavic world.⁸¹ The latter is bigger than the Russian world, and actually contains it (not that the Kremlin concedes⁸²). Kolya is welcome to this sacred space of Belarusian soft power-in-the-making, standing along his father and brushing shoulders with Miss Belarus 2018.⁸³ In addition, he performed a televised piano recital for a

⁷¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/06/belarus-nikolai-lukashenko>.

⁷² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/belarus/11925324/Alexander-Lukashenko-The-leader-who-wants-to-turn-Belarus-into-a-North-Korean-style-dynasty.html>.

⁷³ <http://news.tut.by/society/558117.html>.

⁷⁴ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=208625&lang=ru>.

⁷⁵ <http://www.newsby.org/news/2008/07/06/text10506.htm>.

⁷⁶ Cf <http://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/termine-37597?language=en>.

⁷⁷ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=40832>.

⁷⁸ <http://news.tut.by/otklik/143057.html>.

⁷⁹ http://be.wikipedia.org/wiki/Славянскі_Базар_у_Віцебску;
http://www.tvr.by/news/kultura/aleksandriya_snova_sobiraet_druzey/.

⁸⁰ <http://vetliva.com/tourism/what-to-see/pamyatnik-geograficheskij-tsentru-evropy-v-polotske/>;
<https://www.rferl.org/a/1101144.html>.

⁸¹ <http://blr.belta.by/president/view/lukashenka-budaunitstva-tsentra-minsk-mir-pavinna-stats-uzoram-supratsounitstva-slavjanskaga-svetu-34613-2015>.

⁸² <http://gazeta-slovo.ru/obshestvo/3757-vesy-istorii-zamerli-v-tsentre-slavyanskogo-mira>.

⁸³ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=212665&lang=ru>.

selected public.⁸⁴ In addition, Minsk reinvented itself as a tech hub.⁸⁵ And suddenly, the commonly heard moniker of 'Europe's last dictatorship'⁸⁶ that was commonly applied to Belarus during the 2000s seems to be obsolete. In the ranking of autocratic and totalitarian polities, Azerbaijan, Russia or the de facto states of Abkhazia, Transnistria and South Ossetia display a much worse record of disrespect for democracy and human rights than today's Belarus. Seen against this rapidly darkening background, Belarus appears to be a normal European country, a 'normal dictatorship,' indeed.⁸⁷ Not that much different from Viktor Orbán's autocratic Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński's dictatorial Poland, or Giuseppe Conte's populist Italy, all EU member states.⁸⁸ Donald Trump's US administration excels at 'normalizing' as a new golden standard political behavior that until several years ago was unacceptable.⁸⁹ In this context, unsurprisingly, some in the current Polish government propose Belarus as an appropriate model for the development of Poland and its political system.⁹⁰ The strongman is the future, isn't it?

If nothing rapidly changes in this political jigsaw that has become gradually more accepting of autocracy, Lukashenko's dictatorship stands a good chance of remaining afloat and Kolya seems to be a likely successor to his father. Both are almost sure to adopt the Chinese model of IT-facilitated totalitarian governance, enforced by security forces and intensive surveillance.⁹¹ Belarus's cityscape studded with large-format screens⁹² is already eerily reminiscent of newly-built Chinese cities. I wonder whether father and son will deem it necessary to replicate the Chinese Laogai system of concentration and forced labor 're-education' camps,⁹³ so well-known (at times even too intimately) from the Soviet times to Belarus's middle-aged and older generations.⁹⁴ There is no official censorship in today's Belarus. But perhaps not without a reason, the Russian translation of Viktor Marcinovič's *Mova* 墨瓦 is utterly unavailable in Belarus, let alone its Belarusian-language original. Perhaps, this novel strikes a chord too close to

⁸⁴ <http://hienalouca.com/en/2018/07/08/коля-лукашэнка-перад-публікай-зайгра/>.

⁸⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/world/europe/belarus-minsk-technology.html>; <http://medium.com/@Productized/inside-of-viber-office-in-minsk-belarus-17320ce4a922>.

⁸⁶ http://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/vbmk33/a-visit-to-europes-last-dictatorship;
<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2016/01/belarus-europe-dictator-160120104016003.html>;
<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Belarus-European-Dictatorship-Andrew-Wilson/dp/0300134355>.

⁸⁷ <http://belarusdigest.com/story/no-longer-the-last-dictatorship-in-europe/>.

⁸⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/opinion/.../orban-hungary-kaczynski-poland.html>;
<http://sputniknews.com/analysis/201502151018314027/>.

⁸⁹ www.baltimoresun.com/news/.../bs-ed-op-0827-goldberg-trump-abnormal-20170823;
<http://ottawacitizen.com/opinion/columnists/gormley-donald-trumps-given-us-a-new-normal-and-its-abnormal>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QowRyDdz-CQ>.

⁹⁰ <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-ze-swiata,2/karczewski-lukaszenka-to-taki-ciepły-człowiek,697966.html>;
<http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,103454,21198129,jedyny-kraj-w-europie-z-ktorym-polska-za-pis-poprawila-swoje.html>;
<http://opinie.wp.pl/czy-kaczynski-wyberze-wschod-slawomir-sierakowski-nasz-nowy-przyjaciel-lukaszenka-6067788372529793a>;
<http://udajesie.com/2015/01/13/dlaczego-na-bialorusi-jest-fajnie/>.

⁹¹ Cf http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Shield_Project; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Firewall;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Credit_System.

⁹² Cf <http://naviny.by/new/20160805/1470405815-ogromnyy-ekran-na-fasade-galleria-minsk-budet-pokazyvat-translyacii-iz-rio>;
<https://realt.onliner.by/2016/06/21/doska-3>; <http://stend.mobi/proizvodstvo-i-razmeshhenie-reklamy/reklama-na-bolshih-svetodiodnyih-ekranah-v-minske-i-mogilyove/>.

⁹³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laogai>.

⁹⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulag>.

the reality in today's Belarus and to the Belarusian President's political intentions for the future of *his* country.⁹⁵

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⁹⁵ Cf <http://belsat.eu/in-focus/belarusy-stali-tannaj-pratsounaj-silaj-dlya-kitayu/>.